

Mental Health Stigmas
By Senator Bev Hammerstrom
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Recently, Michigan held a very special event at the State Capitol to focus attention on mental health issues, help erase stigma and dispel the myths that surround mental illness as we welcomed Kristy Worthen and her Mental Health Flag in the Capitol Rotunda. Kristy is on a tour of all 50 states flying the Mental Health Flag that she designed and hand painted to bring awareness to mental health issues.

Kristy is a professional artist, public speaker and mental health advocate. She also has bipolar disorder. She has been in the wellness stage for the past three years, but before that suffered seven years without a diagnosis and no medication. After a suicide attempt, Kristy was correctly diagnosed with bipolar disorder and with access to the new lines of medication available today, she is now living a happy and successful life. She is living proof that people with mental illness can lead full lives and contribute to their communities.

As Chair of the Senate Health Policy Committee and a strong proponent of mental health issues, it was a delight to meet with Kristy and celebrate her success at overcoming this illness. Unfortunately her story is not unique. For months now I have been attempting to “put a face” on mental illness in an effort to educate fellow legislators and help in the fight to overcome the stigma still associated with these illnesses. Kristy, for me, was one more “face” to help spread that message.

The 5’ x 9’ flag Kristy designed and hand painted has a white lighthouse trimmed in red, setting on an island, with a beam of yellow light shining out over the ocean. The inscription on the blue background reads: Shedding Light on Mental Health Issues. Kristy related that the island represented her life for the seven years prior to diagnosis when she felt empty, scared and all alone, washed ashore in a sea of mixed feelings ranging from highly elated to deeply depressed. She felt she had nowhere to turn for help.

The lighthouse in the flag represents her diagnosis and the assurance that she could get better with proper medication. She could now see “the light at the end of the tunnel” and was filled with hope. The yellow beam of light is her advocacy work, letting others know there is hope and help for them as well. And finally, the ocean represents the people who are still floundering with no diagnosis, and the white caps on the waves represent those who have committed suicide due to their mental illness. As a suicide attempt survivor, Kristy feels that suicide and attempted suicide is too high a price to pay for an illness that no one understands, and she is determined to use her flag and her message to bring awareness to mental health issues which affect 1 out of 3 American families each year.

Kristy's flag first flew at the Arkansas State Capitol in her home state in May of 2002 as part of a "May is Mental Health Month" program. Lt. Governor Win Rockefeller of Arkansas was so impressed with her story that he took it to the National Lieutenant Governors Association meeting and asked his colleagues to adopt this as a project and allow Kristy to fly the flag in each state capitol around the country. She is currently on that tour which will culminate in New York on April 12. Michigan became the 21st state to participate.

It was indeed an honor to recognize Kristy's efforts and pay heed to her message as she visited Michigan as well. In this day and age, there is no reason why someone needs to suffer as Kristy did for seven years. However, one of the obstacles those suffering from mental illness face is restricted access to proper treatment. In many health plans, treatment for mental illnesses is "carved out" and treated differently than physical health issues. Kristy's mother, Mary, also spoke in the capitol rotunda, revealing that all four of her children had health problems. She has a daughter with diabetes, a son with cardiac problems, a son who had a lung removed at the age of 13 due to cancer, and Kristy. The other three received appropriate treatment at once; it took Kristy seven years to get the proper diagnosis and even then she had to "fail first" on several less expensive medications before her doctor could prescribe what he considered to be the appropriate medication for Kristy.

In a recent Senate Health Policy committee meeting a mother commented, "If my daughter had leukemia, she would have access to the newest treatments and drugs, but because she suffers from bipolar disorder, she does not. Is that fair?" My response to that is a definite "No." And I intend to do something about it through my mental health parity legislation; hopefully Kristy Worthen's message to Michigan will help in that effort. Thank you, Kristy.